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AUTHOR Graham, Steve; Dwyer, Ann
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ABSTRACT

This investigation sought to determine the extent to which examiners' evaluations of writing performance were influenced by the learning disability label and to identify mediating variables which modify expectancy effects. Forty-four preservice regular education teachers were randomly assigned to one of two expectancy conditions (learning-disabled and normal) and were asked to score three 4th-grade essays which differed in terms of overall writing quality. Prior to scoring the essays, subjects were informed of the educational status (learning-disabled or normal) of the children who wrote the stories. In addition, half of the subjects received a brief introduction on how to use the scoring procedure, while the other half received intensive practice and training. Results indicated that the learning disability label did influence the scores that examiners assigned to children's essays. However, labeling effects were successfully attenuated by providing examiners with training and practice in scoring written products. Furthermore, the marks assigned to students' essays were influenced far more by the writing competence demonstrated by the child than by the disability label attached to the child. (Author/JDD)

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Effects of the Learning Disability Label, Quality of Writing Performance, and Examiner's Level of Expertise on the Evaluation of Written Products

by

Steve Graham

Department of Special Education

University of Maryland

College Park, Maryland 20742

and

Ann Dwyer

Department of Special Education

University of Maine

at Farmington

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Steve Graham

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Abstract

The influence of the learning disability label on examiners' evaluations of children's written essays was investigated. Forty-four preservice regular education teachers were randomly assigned to one of two expectancy conditions: learning disabled and normal. Subjects were asked to score three essays which differed in terms of overall writing quality. Just prior to scoring the essays, subjects were informed of the educational status (i.e., learning disabled or normal) of the fourth grade children who wrote the stories. In addition, one-half of the subjects received a brief introduction on how to use the scoring procedure, while the other half received intensive practice and training. Results indicated that the learning disability label did influence the scores that examiners assigned to children's essays. However, labling effects were successfully attenuated by providing examiners with training and practice in scoring written products. Furthermore, examiners' marks were influenced more by the quality of the essays than by the disability label attached to the child.

Despite the possibility that special education disability labels may facilitate funding, professional communication, and public support, many educators believe that the process of labeling children has detrimental and pervasive effects which may persist well beyond the school years (Burdg & Graham, 1984; MacMillan, Jones, & Aloia, 1974). The most common concerns relate to the hypothesis that disability labels have a direct impact on some aspect of the individual's perception of self and/or an indirect influence in terms of a self-fulfilling prophecy effect (MacMillan et al., 1974). In terms of direct effects, labeling a person as handicapped may change one's self-perception and result in a lower level of aspiration, a reduction in self-concept, or an increase in derogatory behavior. In terms of indirect effects, it is thought that expectations regarding a child's performance are formed on the basis of the stereotype associated with the particular label assigned to the child. It is further postulated that this creates a condition in which teachers, parents, and/or peers treat the child differently than they would if the child had not been labeld. If the child attends to this differential treatment in such a way that her/his behavior or performance conforms to these expectations, then the stereotype connoted by the label is fulfilled.

Although the potential effects of labeling someone as deviant has generated considerable controversy and debate, the various claims regarding the negative effects of labels have not been adequately documented. Research examining the direct

effects of labels has failed to provide conclusive evidence that special education disability labels have a harmful or long-lasting influence (Guskin, Bartel, & MacMillan, 1975; MacMillan et al., 1974). Investigators have found, for example, that special-class placement is a much more powerful predictor of handicapped children's self-perceptions than are the labels assigned to these children (Coleman, 1983, 1984; Rogers, Smith, & Coleman, 1984; Strang, Smith, & Rogers, 1978). In addition, the evidence from studies examining the indirect effects of labels has yielded contradictory results (Aloia & MacMillan, 1983; Freeman & Algozzine, 1980). Although some investigations have shown that labels influence peoples' attitudes and expectations (Aloia, Maxwell, & Aloia, 1981; Burdg & Graham, 1984; Kurtz, Harrison, Neisworth, & Jones, 1977; Severance, & Gasstrom, 1977), other studies have not (Aloia, 1975; Palmer, 1980; Yoshida, & Meyers, 1975). More importantly, there is very little conclusive evidence that supports the proposition that disability labels have a detrimental effect on the behavior of the labeled child or significant others (Guskin et al., 1975; MacMillan et al., 1974).

Labeling and the Learning Disabled

Because of the substantial and consistent increase in the number of students currently being identified as learning disabled (Algozzine, & Korinch, 1985; Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Christenson, 1983), it is particularly important that any

possible effects associated with the assignment of the LD label be identified. If classification as learning disabled has detrimental and pervasive effects that either approach or outweigh the benefits accrued as a result of the services received, then clearly the present system for identifying and instructing these children must be changed. On the other hand, some children with learning problems may not receive the help they need, if those responsible for deciding whether or not to declare students eligible for special services are unjustifiably concerned about the "reported" harmful and long-term effects of labeling.

In an attempt to identify possible labeling effects, researchers have examined both the direct and indirect consequences associated with the assignment of the LD label. Coleman (1984) has reported that the LD label does not automatically result in lowered feelings of self-worth in students so labeled, while several studies have found that elementary grade students' ratings of the social acceptability of a peer observed on a videotape was not influenced by the assignment of the LD label (Foley, 1979; Sutherland, Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Freeman, 1983; Young, Algozzine, & Schmid, 1979). In contrast, researchers have shown that the LD label effects teachers' judgements and perceptions regarding the behavior and/or personality characteristics of a videotaped child (Foster, Schmidt, & Sabatino, 1976; Foster & Ysseldyke, 1976; Jacobs, 1978; Ysseldyke & Foster, 1978). There are several factors, however, which limit the strength and generality of

this observed effect. First, the aforementioned studies involved a videotaped presentation of a single child's behavior in the context of a laboratory setting. Since practitioners generally operate in a more complex environment, there is some question as to the applicability of the findings from these studies. Pflaum, Pascarella, Boswick, & Auer (1980), for example, have found that the behavior of teachers during actual reading lessons was not related to the child's designation as learning disabled. A second limitation involves the observation that the saliency of a label may diminish in the presence of various types of information. A teacher's reaction, for instance, may be altered as a result of prolonged interactions with the labeled child (Yoshida, & Meyers, 1975) or as a result of the child's attractiveness and/or school related behaviors (Algozzine & Stoller, 1981; Aloia, & MacMillan, 1983). Finally, the LD label may have a selective rather than a pervasive influence on teacher's behaviors. Fogel and Nelson (1983) reported that teachers' behavioral observations and grading of academic work were not influenced by the LD label, but global observations were.

Presently, only one study has examined the effects of the LD label on children's performance on a learning task. In an investigatioan by Sutherland and Algozzine (1979), undergraduate students taught normal fourth grade students (labeled as learning disabled or normal) a complex visual-motor coordination task. An examination of students' performance on this task revealed that the LD label had an adverse effect on

girls' performance but not on the performance of boys. The generality of this finding to the natural environment, however, is limited since many students classified as learning disabled do not exhibit visual-motor difficulties (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Lloyd, 1985) and the visual-motor task used in this study is not representative of the types of tasks LD students commonly learn in school.

To summarize, the existing evidence is equivocal and inconclusive. Effects associated with the assignment of the LD label do not appear to be universal and it is probable that there are a number of mediating factors which facilitate or inhibit the influence of a particular label. The purpose of the present study was to further explore the complexity of the labeling phenomenon by determining the extent to which examiners' evaluations of writing performance are influenced by the learning disability label and to identify mediating variables which modify expectancy effects. Writing was chosen as the behavior of concern in this investigation for two reasons. First, writing problems are very common among learning disabled students (Harris, & Graham, 1985). Second, a teacher's evaluation of a student's writing may be particularly susceptible to the influence of a situational factor such as prior knowledge of the child's status (Graham, 1982). The present study, therefore, was designed to determine if the following variables or their interaction affected the scores examiners assigned to stories: (a) the negative stereotype associated with the learning disability label, (b) the writing

behavior exhibited by the person who is labeled and (c) the expertise of the person conducting the evaluation.

Since the learning disability label may engender negative expectations regarding academic functioning, it was hypothesized that examiners would respond differentially when asked to score identical essays written by children labeled learning disabled or normal. It was further predicted that any biasing effects associated with the assignment of the LD label would be mediated by the amount of training that examiners received on how to score children's essays. Maddle, Neisworth, and Kurtz (1980) found, for example, that explicit training in the use of a scale for rating hyperactive behavior reduced the biasing effect of the hyperkinetic label. Finally, it was hypothesized that labeling effects would also be mediated by the quality of the essays that examiners were directed to score. Writing behavior at variance with an assigned label should inhibit expectancy effects, while writing behavior that is compatible should reinforce the connotations of an assigned label (Gottlieb, 1974).

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 44 undergraduate students who were majoring in Education and attending a university in the Midwest. With the exception of one subject, all of the subjects were female. Of the total sample, 24 of the subjects were juniors while 20 were sophomores. The subjects had an average age of

20.2 years.

Materials

Training materials. A reading and training packet on the "holistic scoring" procedure was compiled for each subject. Both packets were designed in accordance with recommendations made by Graham (1982) and Mishler and Hogan (1982). The reading packet included a general description and specific scoring directions for the holistic scoring procedure. The scoring directions are presented below:

> In using the holistic method, the examiner first reads the writing sample (attentively but not laboriously) in order to obtain a general impression of its quality. After reading the writing sample, the examiner immediately makes a rating. A scale of 1 to 8 is used to rate the writing sample, with a score of 1 representing the lowest quality of writing, 8 representing the highest quality of writing, and scores of 4 and 5 representing a middle range of writing quality.

The training packet included two separate sections. In the first section, there were 11 essays which had been written by eighth grade students in response to a picture depicting a forest fire. Each of these essays had been collected and scored as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1981). The second section contained six essays which had been written by fourth grade students in response to the three stimulus pictures contained in the Test of Written

Language (Hammill & Larsen, 1983). These pictures show a group of people moving from a planet with a hostile environment to a planet with more suitable surroundings. Each of these essays had been collected and scored by the authors of this study.

The arrangement of essays in the two sections of the training packet was similar. First, examples of essays that represented high (7-8), medium (4-5), and low (1-2) holistic scores were presented. This was followed by a series of practice essays which were read and scored as part of the training process.

Experimental essays. Three essays which differed in terms of writing quality were used in this study. These essays were chosen by directing 40 normal fourth grade students to write a story in response to the three stimulus pictures contained in the Test of Written Language (TOWL). A typed copy of each of the resulting essays was independently scored by three examiners who were English teachers with considerable experience in assessing and teaching composition. The examiners were directed to "assign a rating of either high, medium, or low to each essay." Once all of the essays had been scored, stories that had consistently received either high, medium, or low ratings were sorted and one essay was selected from each of the three groups. In order to validate the examiners' ratings, the three essays were then independently scored according to the criterion specified in the Thematic Maturity subtest of the TOWL. This subtest "measures a student's ability to write in a manner that will easily and

and efficiently convey meaning" (Hammill & Larsen, 1983, p. 8). For students normally enrolled in the fourth grade, the high, medium, and low stories were ranked at the 84th, 63rd, and 50th percentile, respectively. Thus, the rank order of the three target essays was the same in terms of examiner's holistic ratings and thematic maturity scores. The three experimental essays are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Procedures

The 44 subjects were randomly assigned to one of four groups: normal label - no training, normal label - training, learning disabled label - no training, and learning disabled label - training. The order in which the high, medium, and low essays were presented to each subject was also randomized.

Initially, all subjects received a brief orientation on how to use the holistic scoring procedure. First, each subject was directed to examine the reading packet. The reading packet was then presented orally and subjects were encouraged to ask questions about the scoring procedures. At this time, subjects were told that the study was designed to determine if the training procedures recommended by Hogan and Mishler (1982) were effective.

Immediately following this initial orientation, subjects in the no-training groups were directed to score the three experimental essays. In contrast, subjects assigned to the

training groups received additional instruction and practice in using the holistic scoring procedure. This was accomplished by asking each of these subjects to examine the high, medium, and low eighth grade example essays contained in the first section of the training packet. The qualities of each of the example essays was then individually reviewed and discussed. Next, subjects scored the remaining eighth grade practice essays one at a time. After an essay was scored, the subject's rating was compared to the criterion score established by examiners at the National Assessment of Educational Progress. If the subject's rating and the criterion score were similar, the subject was praised. If the ratings were not similar, subjects were encouraged to explore possible reasons why differences were obtained. Instruction and practice in scoring the fourth grade essays (contained in the second section of the training packet) were similar. Subjects examined the high, medium, and low example essays and reviewed and discussed the qualities of each. Next, the practice essays were scored one at a time and the subject's rating was compared to the criterion score established by the authors of this study. Depending upon the accuracy of the subject's score, either praise or further discussion followed. Training took approximately one hour to complete, and subjects were directed to score the experimental essays immediately following training.

Prior to scoring the experimental essays, each subject was informed of the educational status of the children who wrote the stories. The subject was asked to read a statement that

said either "These stories were written by normal fourth grade students," or "These stories were written by learning disabled students in the fourth grade."

Results

The statistical design used was a three-way analysis of variance design with two, two-level between-subjects factors (learning disabled label versus normal label, and training versus no-training) and one three-level repeated measures factor (scores assigned to the high, medium, and low experimental essays). Means and standard deviations for experimental essays are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 About Here

The results of the analysis disclosed a significant interaction between training and label ($F = 8.44$, $df = 1/40$, $p < .006$), which indicated that amount of training differentially affected the impact that the two labels had on the essay scores assigned by subjects. An analysis of simple main effects revealed that subjects who were simply familiarized with the scoring procedure assigned significantly lower scores to essays that had been reportedly written by the "learning disabled" ($F = 7.89$, $df = 1/20$, $p < .01$). In contrast, there were no significant differences in the scores that more highly trained subjects assigned to essays reportedly written by "learning disabled" and "normal" pupils. Thus, as was hypothesized, the LD label did have a negative effect on the evaluation of

written products, but the impact of the label was mediated by providing examiners with additional training.

The three-way analysis also yielded a significant main effect for essays ($F = 75.24$, $df = 2/80$, $p < .001$) and, more importantly, a significant interaction between essays and training ($F = 7.34$, $df = 2/80$, $p < .001$). Thus, scores assigned to the three experimental essays were differentially affected by the amount of training that subjects received. Although subsequent post-hoc analysis indicated that the amount of training did not differentially affect the scores assigned to the "medium" and "low" essays, subjects who received training assigned significantly higher scores to the "high" essay than did subjects who were not trained ($F = 5.41$, $df = 1./42$, $p < .025$).

It is also interesting to note that the scores assigned by subjects who received additional training were congruent with the "high," "medium," and "low" descriptors that had previously been established for the three experimental essays. Following an analysis of simple main effects ($F = 68.53$, $df = 2/42$, $p < .00$), a Newman-Keuls test applied to the mean scores revealed that at the .01 level the "high" essay received higher scores than both of the other essays and that the "medium" essay received higher scores than the "low" essay. On the other hand, scores assigned by subjects who were just familiarized with scoring procedures were only partially congruent with the descriptors that had been established for the experimental essays. Following an analysis of simple main effects ($F =$

18.85, df = 2/42, $p < .00$), a Newman-Keuls test applied to the mean scores indicated that while the "high" and "medium" essays received higher scores than the "low" essay ($p < .01$), there was no significant difference between the "high" and "medium" essays.

Discussion

The results of this investigation highlight the complexity of the labeling phenomenon. The hypothesis that the learning disability label has a negative impact on the evaluation of students' academic behavior received, at best, only limited support. Examiners who were simply familiarized with scoring procedures but received no training assigned lower scores to stories reportedly written by "learning disabled" students than to stories written by "normal" students. Any statement about the impact of the learning disability label, however, must be qualified in light of the mediating effect of examiner's level of expertise. Evaluations of students' essays by examiners who had received only one-hour of practice were not influenced by the disability label attached to the child. Thus, it appears that the often cited labeling effect can be successfully attenuated by providing examiners with a small amount of training. Similar results with different labels have been reported by Cattell (1957) and Madle et al., (1980).

Contrary to expectations, the interaction between label and quality of essays was not significant. Labeling effects, therefore, were not mediated by writing behavior that was either congruent or at variance with the learning disability

label. It does appear, however, that the quality of a student's essay has a powerful influence on the scores that examiners assign. While the learning disability label only influenced the scores assigned by examiners who had not received more extensive training and practice, quality of students' essays affected the evaluations of both trained and untrained examiners. Although this finding is not necessarily surprising, it does provide further support for the contention that a student's academic competence has a more powerful effect on the attitudes and decisions of others than the label attached to the child (cf. Algozzine & Stoller, 1981; Gottlieb, 1974).

The results from the present study also demonstrate that the marks that examiners assign to essays may be influenced by a variety of different factors. Attributes internal to the essay as well as external factors such as examiner's level of expertise or prior knowledge of the child's status can affect an examiner's judgement. Because various factors can influence the accuracy of writing evaluations, it is important that examiners receive proper orientation, training, and practice (Graham, 1982). The training materials and procedures used in this study were judged to be effective since the trained examiners' mean scores on the three experimental essays were congruent with scores established via both the Test of Written Language (Hammill, & Larsen, 1983) and by more experienced examiners. As a result, these training procedures provide an effective means for expanding preservice and inservice

teachers' skills in assessing written language.

In summary, the results of the present study cast some doubt on the strength and generality of the alleged negative effects attributed to the assignment of the LD label. Although the learning disability label did influence the scores that examiners assigned to children's essays, labeling effects were successfully attenuated by providing examiners with a small amount of training and practice in scoring students' written products. Furthermore, the marks assigned to students' essays were influenced far more by the writing competence demonstrated by the child than by the disability label attached to the child.

Even though the evidence accumulated to date does not provide adequate support for the assertion that the learning disability label has detrimental and long-lasting effects, this should not be interpreted to imply that such effects do not exist. In order to resolve the controversy surrounding the labeling issue, further research is needed to determine if, and under what conditions, the learning disability label affects teacher behavior and student performance. Investigators should also attempt to document mediating variables which successfully attenutate labeling effects.

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Table 1
Experimental Essays

High Essay

Once there was a planet named Saturn and people lived on the planet. Saturn was use too winter weather. On June 3, 1860 the sun was between Saturn and Jupiter but it was closer to Saturn and the ground started to crack. The reason why Jupiter didn't crack was because they are use to the sun. Jupiter is close to Earth. The next day they had too move because it was going to explode so the moved to Pluto. There they ment people that were nice to them. When they came they didn't have any food. And the people gave them food. They lived happilier ever after.

Middle Essay
"The Cracked Planet"

One day a planet was begening to crack, and the people there had gathered all of the animals to move to Jupiter. When they reached Jupiter the planet that cracked exploded. On Jupiter they made machines that rolled and ships like the one they made to get there. Then they started to plant plants and flowers for food.

Low Essay
"The End of Pluto"

I was there when it happened it was terible. My friend John he had just went to find a new home for us he did and he came back just in time I should say. So we went to Mercury and we made good friends at Mercury.

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Experimental Essays

oup	High Essay Mean	High Essay SD	Medium Essay Mean	Medium Essay SD	Low Essay Mean	Low Essay SD	All Essays Mean	All Essays SD
main effects[a]								
LD[b]	5.00	1.95	4.64	1.40	2.41	.96	4.02	1.87
Normal	5.77	1.34	4.91	1.11	3.00	1.31	4.56	.92
Training	5.95	1.13	4.77	1.02	2.41	1.05	4.38	.70
No Training	4.82	1.99	4.77	1.48	3.00	1.23	4.20	1.31
cells[c]								
LD - Training	6.18	1.25	4.91	1.38	2.45	1.13	4.52	1.99
LD - No Training	3.82	1.83	4.36	1.43	2.36	.81	3.52	1.62
Normal - Training	5.73	1.01	4.64	.50	2.36	1.03	4.24	1.66
Normal - No Training	5.82	1.66	5.18	1.47	3.64	1.29	4.88	1.71
tal	5.39	1.70	4.77	1.26	2.71	1.17	4.29	

N = 22 each group

Learning disabled label

N = 11 each group